Sharing our stories: celebrating critically reflective psychological textual practice

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abstract

This study involves my engaging with ideas through three interweaving, storied strands: some personal experiences of my own, the historical development of the academic discipline of psychology, and the pivotal autobiographical vignettes in five psychological articles. Ethical considerations permeate the overlapping theoretical, metaphorical and analytical processes of this work. I consider how writers and readers can engage together through the reflexive sharing of personal narratives, working toward interpretations of experiences in terms of subject positionings within powerful cultural discourses. A metaphorical perspective is integrated into my research process to help me in my attempts to articulate and evoke some fleeting traces of meaning through the elusive symbolic system of language. My analyses of the five focus pieces of writing attend to their skilfully metaphorical, critically reflective use of language within a supportive, nurturing discursive space. This thesis celebrates the transformational possibilities inherent in these pieces of psychological counter-practice. I believe these writers usefully address social sciences' 'crisis' concerns around the relationship of psychology with 'real' people, enabling re-interpretations of experiences in terms of gender and social power relationships and the fashioning of different, more useful meanings for our storied, culturally directed experiences.

appreciation

...for the ongoing help and caring support of supervisor *extraordinaire* Mandy Morgan, whose discerning questions and germane suggestions kept me focussed on my beliefs and aims as i found my way through the intermingling theory and practice of this personally meaningful thesis experience.

...for my partner, Colin, a careful listener and valuable sounding-board, whose astute responses from a non-psychological perspective frequently helped me to clarify my developing ideas as i worked on this project.

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Stories go in circles. They don't go in straight lines. So it helps if you listen in circles because there are stories inside stories and stories between stories and finding your way through them is as easy and hard as finding your way home. And part of the finding *is the getting lost. [For] if you're lost, you really start to look around and to listen.*
Deena Metzger, 1986, p. 104

This thesis traces some meanings of interlaced narratives and, in one sense, begins with a personal story. On a spring morning in 2004, a day of clouds moving across bright sunshine, I was in the little town of Pontorson in northern France. I wandered over to look inside the medieval Église Notre Dame but, realising a service was taking place, I decided to explore the rest of the town and return later. As I rounded the corner of the ancient church, the congregation began to sing and, as their voices reached me in a hauntingly muffled way through the ancient stone walls, I experienced something which, though fleeting, was exceedingly intense and moving. I perceived an image of generation after generation of people filing into this church over hundreds of years, and this seemed to me to be a manifestation of humanity's bewildered searching for answers to the vast, mysterious questions of life. I felt pangs of aching compassion for all of us who struggle through life groping for understanding about our places in the world. Never before having experienced this particular form of intensity, and not being a religious person, this occurrence was totally unexpected and deeply emotional, and occupied my thoughts a great deal during the next weeks.

When I returned to New Zealand, I resumed my graduate work in the area of narrative psychology and in my first email to my supervisor, Mandy Morgan, I described this event. Mandy was interested in my experience, recalling that she had felt a similar intense awareness of history at the Blue Mosque in Istanbul. She also recommended an article written by Mark Freeman in 2002 in which he discusses a comparable incident during a visit to Berlin. I read this piece, which resonated more powerfully for me than any other psychology article I had encountered up to that point. Not only does Freeman movingly describe an event with which I could empathise after my experience in Pontorson, but his very inclusion in this article of such a personal narrative seemed to me to represent a decisive step away from the impersonality of most psychological writing. Freeman relates how, while viewing the monuments, gardens and other sights of the city during a bus trip, he was suddenly overcome by a sudden, acute awareness of

the tragic history played out in Berlin, and overwhelmed by a deep feeling of sadness. In the same way that I was surprised at my feelings outside the church in Pontorson because of my irreligious stance, Freeman wondered at his response because, though nominally a Jew, this religion has not been a central part of his life. He even admits that mystical, arcane explanations crossed his mind as he tried to make sense of this experience in which history became a "living, breathing presence" (p 197). In his article, Freeman interweaves this personal story with a theoretical discussion around ways in which the narratives within which our societies are embedded send us off with cultural 'baggage' which steers us toward interpreting our experiences in particular ways. As Gordon Mills (1976, cited in Bruner, 1986) asks, "Isn't it strange how [Kronberg] Castle changes as soon as one imagines that Hamlet lived here?" (p. 45).

As I continued with my work during the year, I came across four other psychological articles in which, like Freeman, the authors have included personal stories which work reflexively alongside theoretical discussions around the paradigm of narrativity – a psychological approach which conceptualises human lives as culturally embedded, storied constructions articulated through language (Bruner, 1986; Crossley, 2000; Polkinghorne, 1988; Sarbin, 1986). Ian Parker (2003) uses personal vignettes to help him examine how our identities are constituted in psychoanalytic narratives. In his 2001 piece, Theodore Sarbin discusses emotion, reflecting on his own experiences of crying as part of cultural narrative plots. Bronwyn Davies and Rom Harré (1990) work with an argument they experienced together, to consider the ways in which stances assumed in conversations reflect the social narratives we are living out. And in their 2001 article, Mandy Morgan and Leigh Coombes draw on a personal incident to explore interpretations of silence within conversations inhering in narrative constructions. These five pieces examine ways in which personal stories are constituted in cultural narratives; they consider how such narratives give certain meanings to our experiences and shape our understandings of our identities. I believe that central to the huge effect they had on me is their reflexivity; these authors do not just *discuss* culturally constructed narratives, but *include themselves* in the discussion by exploring meanings of their own experiences through telling their own stories.

These articles affected me profoundly, speaking to me on emotional and intellectual levels. They evoked for me resonances of past personal experiences and fostered

reconsideration of them as I began to recognise how my own stories are caught up in larger social narratives. And they seemed to achieve this through a new approach to psychological writing which reached out emotionally to me. More and more I was realising that I wanted to work with these pieces – to consider how they moved me the way they did, what they could suggest about my own experiences and how they might be valuable for psychology. In a specific way then, this is where my thesis began – with an intense personal experience and the discovery of five personally meaningful psychological articles.

In a more general way, however, this thesis can be located as a moment within some intertwined, ongoing processes – both within my own life and also within the historical development of the discipline of academic psychology. In terms of my personal story, I am interested in and curious about my yearnings, in these later years of my life, to pursue particular interests – my ongoing study of psychology through Massey University, artistic and musical activities, and my passion for French culture and language. I feel that I may be engaging with these areas to try to find new ways of exploring who I am and what is important to me by coming from different perspectives and expressing myself through different 'languages' or 'voices'. In terms of my current location within my own life story, these five pieces are valuable because they have facilitated reinterpretations of past memories through their own use of alternative psychological 'voices'.

In this achievement of a new way of 'speaking' to their readers, these articles also seem to be a part of the continuing flowering of post-'crisis' issues in the social sciences which was, in turn, part of the broader cultural postmodern movement which took hold during the last half of the twentieth century (Burr, 1995; Crotty, 1998; Roiser, 1997). Postmodernism questioned and challenged established ways of thinking about and doing things. From M. C. Escher's illusionary graphic art to composer Philip Glass's unclassifiable genre of music, the postmodern stance eschewed traditional authority and rigid standards, embraced multiplicity and fluidity, and ushered in a simultaneously frightening and liberating new era. Seeing the universe as an empty, meaningless void, postmodernism can be located within the ontological position that there is no fundamental reality or truth (Crotty, 1998; Gergen, 1991; Lyon, 1994; Roiser, 1997).

For the social sciences, including psychology, the 'crisis' which began during the 1950s and continued through the 1980s, occurred within a postmodern cultural space, questioning the assumptions of the discipline as it had come to be conceptualised and practiced (Burr, 1995; Crotty, 1998; Roiser, 1997). Psychology emerged initially as a philosophical area of study, notably with the introspectionist work of William James (Lefrançois, 1995). However, the discipline was soon captured by the scientific model with its keynote of logical positivism – the conviction that knowledge can only be acquired through empirical observation (usually experimentation) and the application of quantitative methods of aggregate analysis (Gergen, 1985; Gergen, 1991; Tuffin, 2005). Mainstream psychology, ignoring its philosophical roots, is now conventionally considered to have begun with the establishment of Wilhelm Wundt's scientific laboratory at the University of Leipzig in 1897 (Lefrançois, 1995).

Crisis writers deplored the application of logical positivism to the study of human beings and the resultant virtual disappearance of the 'real person' psychology was ostensibly interested in (Pancer, 1997; Tuffin, 2005). I was, along with many other students, certainly surprised and disappointed by my first university psychology course. I had looked forward to studying material that might illuminate something about myself and people I interacted with every day. Instead, I was presented with a discipline neatly divided into discrete constructs which were experimentally investigated and statistically summarised. As an English literature major, I found this dryness and dehumanisation disillusioning and relatively meaningless in terms of reaching any new understandings about myself or others.

Social constructionism is one of the epistemologies which developed in response to crisis concerns around the inappropriateness of using a scientific approach to study human beings (Gergen, 1985; Gergen, 1991; Misra, 1993). This stance rejects the dehumanising *reification* inherent in a scientific conceptualisation of psychology – that is, the assumption that human phenomena are essential entities which can be investigated without recognising their production by human social processes (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Eacker, 1972; Gergen, 1985). For example, Sarbin (2001) deplores the "essentialist view of regarding emotions as thing-like entities...quasi-objects" (p. 217), finding value instead in conceptualising an emotional behaviour like crying as part of a culturally embedded narrative within which identities are constructed. From a

social constructionist perspective, meanings of reality and truth in a postmodern world are contextual – they are interpretations constructed by people in the course of their sociolinguistic interactions at particular times and in particular places (Burr, 1995; Gergen, 1985; Gergen, 1999; Tuffin, 2005). This is in clear contrast to the way in which mainstream, scientific psychology has "...done its best to imagine what it is to be human without being social" (Bradley, 2005, p. 83).

This constructionist idea is not only applicable to human attitudes and behaviours addressed by psychological studies; it can also be used to reflexively look at the principles and methods employed by psychologists themselves in their interactions with experimental subjects – interactions which are themselves social, meaning-making encounters. One way that crisis writers focussed on the dehumanising character of scientific psychology was through their concern with the prevailing researcher-researched relationship. The researcher was assumed to be an objective 'expert' whose own attitudes did not in any way impinge on or invalidate the workings or findings of the scientific method. The experimental subject became a mere object of study. No recognition was afforded to what each brought to the experimental situation as human beings who live in social environments informed by particular cultural narratives. (Burr, 1995; Gergen, 1985; Riger, 1992). As Mark Freeman's (2002) experience in Berlin led him to recognise, we bring a world of cultural experience to every situation – including the researcher-researched encounter – each one of which is constituted in and played out in terms of socially constructed meanings.

I am working from a social constructionist perspective in this thesis, shifting attention from the researcher-researched dyad to focus instead on the dynamics of textual relationships, particularly the social power relationships involving academics who write psychological articles and students (like me) who read them. Through their reflexive narrativity, the writers of these five articles bring real people back into psychology; they include themselves – and me – in their discussions in a personally meaningful way. They challenge reifications of psychologists' and students' places within the institution of academic psychology in which these are constituted, recognising their social production. My feelings of being invited into a more inclusive type of psychology enabled me to consider my own emotional experiences as valid and potentially fruitful

stories. I hope that my work here will become a step in interwoven journeys across changing personal and psychological landscapes.

...narrative psychology bears within it the promise of fashioning a different kind of psychology, one that...seeks to practice a deep fidelity to lived experience in all of its variousness.

Mark Freeman, 2003, p. 344